

## ‘Girl Interrupting’

### History and Art as Clairvoyance in the Fiction of Vigdís Grímsdóttir

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**ABSTRACT:** The year 1980 marks a distinctive change and exciting renewal in the general development of post-war Icelandic fiction. An obsessive preoccupation with rural nostalgia and urban malaise gradually gives way to a decidedly anti-realist fiction which celebrates the wonders of everyday day life in the city. The term *magical realism* is often used in this context, and indeed, there can be little doubt that the Icelandic translation of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1978 constituted an important influence on writers during this period. One contemporary Icelandic author who has made striking use of magical realist strategies to dislodge the current impulses of modernity in Icelandic culture and disrupt imposed ways of perceiving reality is Vigdís Grímsdóttir. The aim of this article is to discuss the innovative ways in which Vigdís has used Icelandic story-telling and folklore traditions, preserved and passed down mostly by women, to reaffirm, from a female perspective, a localised cultural imagination within a contemporary globalised Icelandic urban context.

**RÉSUMÉ:** L’année 1980 marque un changement net et un renouveau excitant dans le développement de la fiction islandaise de l’après-guerre. La préoccupation obsessionnelle pour la nostalgie rurale et le malaise urbain ont graduellement laissé place à une fiction anti-réaliste célébrant l’émerveillement au quotidien dans la ville. Le terme réalisme magique est souvent utilisé dans ce contexte, et il ne fait aucun doute que la traduction islandaise de Cent ans de solitude de Gabriel Garcia Marquez constitue une influence importante chez les écrivains de cette époque. Un des auteurs islandais contemporains qui fit un usage saisissant des stratégies du réalisme magique afin de déloger les élans actuels de la modernité dans la culture islandaise et de chambouler les manières imposées de percevoir la réalité est Vigdís Grímsdóttir. Le but de cet article est d’examiner la manière innovatrice avec laquelle Vigdís a utilisé les histoires islandaises et les traditions folkloriques, principalement préservées et transmises par les femmes, afin de réaffirmer, à travers une perspective féminine, une imagination culturelle locale au sein d’un contexte urbain moderne et globalisé.

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uring the last few decades, Icelandic fiction has seen significant transformation and exciting renewal. It was particularly in the 1980s and 1990s that a fresh wind made itself felt in this area of Icelandic literature. Building on modernist experiments initiated during the 1960s, the obsessive post-war preoccupation with a gloomy urban realism gave way to a decidedly anti-realist fiction which celebrates the wonders of everyday life in the city, rather than pitting an urban malaise against the rural idyll. In discussions of these works, it became increasingly common to find the term *magical realism*, and indeed, there can be little doubt that Guðbergur Bergsson's translation of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* into Icelandic, published in 1978, constituted an important influence in this respect.

The advent of these recent changes in Icelandic fiction has generally become associated with the so-called "68 generation," a group of young writers who, in their works, turned Reykjavík into an exciting area of wonder and magic. Looking back to their childhood days, writers like Pétur Gunnarsson (b. 1947), Einar Kárason (b. 1955), and Einar Már Guðmundsson (b. 1954) portrayed wondrous journeys of exploration from the perspective of young boys growing up in the city. These works quickly reached a large and enthusiastic readership and soon became the new face of Icelandic literature. Their impact was such that, in an interview in 1986, a little less than ten years after the publication of the first of these novels, Helga Kress began to question the influence of this "boys' literature," as she called it, on the development of women's writing: where were the women in these little boys' sagas? (Borhammar 1986 [page ref required])

A decade earlier, when women were producing more literature than ever before in Icelandic literary history, the male establishment had begun to deride this wave of novels as "*kellingabækur*," old wives' books, which flooded the market at the expense of "real," innovative literature. To a large extent, this debate was in fact really about the need for literary change, and certainly there is no denying that the few experimental modernist writers of the time were finding it very hard to gain recognition, indeed an audience, while the storytellers were enjoying great popularity. Many of these were women, some of whom had indeed only started writing at a riper age, when they no longer had the care of young families taking up most of their time. However, with this highly derisive dismissal of all writing it perceived as traditional old wives' tales, the male establishment dealt a devastating blow to women's writing. Now, it seemed that "the boys," as they have since come to be known (much to their annoyance), were back with a vengeance, having found their own, innovative ways of storytelling, and once again usurping the literary arena. Where did this leave women writers, and the expression of female experience?

In this article I will investigate some of the ways in which Icelandic women writers have gone about inscribing their own experiences and views in Icelandic

literature by looking to their own storytelling tradition and using innovative narrative techniques to give this tradition new meaning in a contemporary Icelandic urban context. Due to the inevitably rather limited scope of an article, I will focus my discussion primarily on Vigdís Grímsdóttir's (b. 1953) fiction prior to 2000. My reasons for choosing this particular author as my main focus are the following: she is of the same generation as "the boys," and her writing career roughly spans the same time-period; she is one of Iceland's most continuously innovative writers of the last three decades; and she has been among the best known contemporary women writers outside Iceland today, who has had many of her works translated into a number of languages. And last but not least, she is one of the authors whose work critics have frequently labelled *magical realist*.

The attraction of magical realism for Icelandic writers is perhaps not all that surprising when one considers Iceland's history and situation: on the margins of European geography and culture, an ex-colony of Denmark only since full independence was achieved in 1944, and still reeling from the sudden, dramatic leap from rurality to modernity in the course of the twentieth century, Icelanders are continuing the process of negotiating and articulating a cultural identity to match its current position as a small, peripheral, modern and independent nation that is also an active participant in a global culture. Writers and critics have long recognized that magical realism offers particularly attractive fictional strategies to marginal and post-colonial cultures, mainly because it "facilitates the fusion or co-existence of different worlds, spaces, systems, that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction," as Lois Parkinson Zomara and Wendy Faris put it in their introduction to *Magical Realism* (6). Thus it allows a renewed valuation of a local (national) cultural tradition alongside, or within, a modernity suddenly and traumatically imposed rather than developed locally. In an Icelandic context, it makes it possible for authors to engage in a dialogue with their own rich literary past, born of a rural culture and impressive geography, thereby reaffirming a localised cultural imagination within a modern, globalized urban context.

Of course, magical realism is not an unproblematic and undisputed term. Considering the present purpose and scope, it seems hardly relevant, however, to enter into a discussion whether magical realism is even to be considered a separate movement or a part of late modernism or post-modernism, or whether it relies in part or in its entirety on fantastic and/or surrealist modes of fiction. Each of these questions alone could easily form the basis for a separate study. For the purpose of this article, suffice it to say that I base my own understanding of the term largely on its use here in Canada in a post-colonial context, where it is viewed as a fictional strategy that relies on local pre- or anti-modern discourses to interrupt, question, contaminate an imposed colonial discourse of modernity that has its basis in European cultural centres. In addition, I rely on Sigríður Albertsdóttir's discussion on magical realism in contemporary Icelandic fiction,

and, like her, I base myself on the five characteristics identified by Wendy Faris (167-74) that make magical realist fiction:

1. the text contains an irreducible element of magic, which cannot be explained according to the laws of the universe as we know them; i.e. magical things “really” happen, thereby disrupting the ordinary logic of cause and effect;
2. there is a “renewal” of the realistic tradition through extensive attention to sensory detail and events grounded firmly in historical realities, but these realistic histories are often alternate versions of these realities and exist side-by-side with mythical components, implying that eternal mythical truths and historical events are both essential components of our collective memory;
3. Tzvetan Todorov’s formulation of the fantastic as hesitation between two contradictory understandings of events inscribed in the text, between the uncanny (explainable according to the laws of the universe) and the marvellous (the laws as we know them would require some alteration), also occurs in magical realist texts;
4. an experience of the closeness or near-merging of two spaces, two realms: the magical realist vision exists at the intersection of two worlds, where boundaries are fluid and/or blurred;
5. magical realist fiction questions received ideas about time, space and identity, and reorient them.

Finally, to clarify my understanding of the difference between fantasy and magical realism, I consider magical realism to be a form of narrative that is polyphonic and achieves its effects through contamination, combination, and the symbiosis of different worlds, whereas I regard fantasy as primarily oppositional, a mode where reality and the uncanny are distinct and work against each other, or rely on a perceived opposition for the intended effect. In other words, whereas fantasy is very much a literary artifice, “cerebral” magical realism relies on faith and effects a combination of reality with fantastical elements out of which marvellous elements grow organically.

Iceland’s literary heritage is based on a long-standing popular storytelling tradition enriched by folklore and fantasy antedating modernity in Iceland, some of it with pre-Christian roots. Obviously, this source forms a fruitful and potentially powerful counter-discourse to respond to and engage with the overwhelming incoming tide of a mass global culture threatening to obliterate the tiny speck on the European cultural map that is Iceland, and find ways instead of creating a modus that will allow both discourses, both cultural systems, to exist simultaneously; in other words, to be both Icelandic and international. In recent Icelandic fiction, references to or elements from the sagas are incorporated as

part of contemporary life in Reykjavík, together with the Beatles, rap, clubbing and grunge (see also Allard). Characters effortlessly spice up their English-based street-Icelandic with quotes from Sturla Þórðarson and Egill Skallagrímsson. The narratives delight in storytelling and storytellers, as leaps of wild and boundless imagination propel the characters forward, with a ghost lurking just around the next street corner. Iceland is full of ghosts. They are part of a traditional Icelandic perception of what constitutes reality, another important reason for the attraction of magical realism in Iceland. As the author Svava Jakobsdóttir (1930-2004) has explained, the realism of the bourgeois nineteenth-century novel is very different from the saga-realism which has influenced Icelandic literature to this day, which is a realism that allows for a deeper, wider understanding and perception of what is “real,” and a willingness on the part of Icelandic audiences across the centuries to allow fiction and poetry to determine the limits of reality (Dagný Kristjánsdóttir 1990: 12-13). Speaking at a conference in Edinburgh in 2002, Einar Már Guðmundsson discussed the influence of magical realism on literature and said: “what exactly is this term supposed to imply? That there is a realism without magic? The sagas, outstanding for their ‘realism,’ are full of magic. That there is a magic without realism? As if there were no realism in the stories of Borges or H.C. Andersen!” And when I recently mentioned my interest in magical realism and Icelandic fiction to an Icelandic colleague, she laughed and said: “but ALL Icelandic fiction is magical realist!”

In Iceland, women writers, even more than the men, appear to be the natural inheritors of these magical realist fictional strategies. Helga Kress’ history of women’s literature in Iceland shows how women’s writing has developed from *seiðr*, or magical incantations, *spár*, or visions, and dreams, in pre-Christian times, through oral tradition: folk- and fairy-tales and ballads, thus managing to survive alongside and on the margins of a learned literary tradition written and dominated by men. These stories and songs relate female experiences and desires, portraying life as a woman in a patriarchal world, hiding or escaping to ideal worlds of the imagination. When women finally begin to write and their works to be published, around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, they use this tradition to express and give form to their own experiences, using the inside point of view. Poets like Hulda (1881-1946) revive the oral tradition of women’s folk poetry, using simple language and a free-flowing form, a significant departure from the strict poetic rules that had governed the dominant male tradition. They express the clash between society’s norms and women’s longings for freedom and education, and look to nature as a refuge.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the first attempts at fictional experimentation came from women, although the innovations they introduced initially went largely unrecognized. Ásta Sigurðardóttir (1930-72), Halldóra B. Björnsdóttir (1907-68) and Ragnheiður Jónsdóttir (1895-1967) were among the pioneers of a modernist short fiction that attempted to expose the deceptive surfaces of daily

life and portrayed women in a no-man's land, outcasts in the new urban middle-class society of post-war Iceland, on the boundaries of life and death. Lost in fantasies and alcoholic hallucinations in an attempt to escape their alienation, their narratives began to crack the boundaries of objective realism.

Svava Jakobsdóttir built on this tradition when, in the 1960s, she began publishing her stories, which constituted the most conscious break with the constraints of mimetic realism. In an article from 1980 entitled "Reynsla og raunveruleiki" [Experience and Reality] (1974), she describes the problems she faced as a woman writing in a male tradition, wishing to remain faithful to her own experience in her writing:

Kvenleg reynsla er að mestu falin undir yfirborðinu í menningarlífi okkar. Hver sú kona sem byrjar að skrifa ... uppgötvar skjótt að breitt bil er milli reynsluheims hennar sem er dulinn og umfram allt lokaður og ríkjandi, opinberrar menningar. Ætli hún að leita að sjálfri sér og reynslu sinni í ríkjandi bókmenntahefð kemst hún fljótt að því að aðeins 1/10 hluti hennar er sýnilegar. Hinir 9/10 hlutar eru duldir.

(226-27)

[Female experience is, for the most part, concealed beneath the surface of our culture. Any woman who begins to write, ..., quickly discovers a wide gap between her world of experience – which is hidden and, above all, closed – and the dominant, official culture. If she searches for herself and her experience in the prevailing literary tradition, she soon realizes that only one-tenth of this experience is visible; the other nine-tenths are hidden.]

(trans. Alison Tartt, in Helga Kress 503)

She decided to challenge the dominant way of perceiving reality, calling it into question, by breaking it up from within: turning the inside out, and letting hidden inner experiences determine what is "real," what is "normal." She employed the mode of fantasy, but describing it as if it were completely real, an everyday occurrence. Thus, ordinary reality for women becomes, in Svava's fiction, grotesque and horrific. This atmosphere is enhanced by images of enclosures, which create a feeling of claustrophobia and imprisonment (women locked up in their houses, between concrete walls), and images of reflection and outer appearance, mirrors, photographs, clothes, which are unable to hold the actual selves hiding within (see also Ástráður Eysteinnsson 2000).

Women's writing in Iceland has, in other words, continued to rely on folklore and fantasy to express a reality for which there were no modes available in the dominant male literary tradition. As the title to the first anthology of Icelandic women's writing, *Draumur um veruleika* [A Dream about Reality] (1977) appropriately indicates, women authors have had to dream up a reality that expresses their own experiences and perceptions rather than someone else's.

And it is this history, this tradition that has continued to nourish much of women's writing in Iceland, and accounts at least partly for the attraction that magical realism holds for women authors as well as for men, although there seems to be a difference in the use of magical realism as a fictional strategy. While the magical realism of authors like Einar Már Guðmundsson is retrospective, recreating the child that sees the magic in a daily environment, women writers seem much more interested in the here and now, in the exploration of connections, human relations and community, the cyclical perspective, liminalities and inner realities: realities of the mind where anything can and does happen.

Vigdís Grímsdóttir published her first book, a collection of short stories entitled *Tíu myndir úr lífi þínu. Sögur um þykjustuleiki og alvörudrauma* [Ten Pictures from your Life: Stories of Make-Believe Games and Factual Dreams] in 1983, hailed immediately as one of the most innovative pieces of writing to appear in a long time. Each story is introduced by a poem instead of a title, so that poetry and prose become closely intertwined, blurring the boundaries between the genres. Each story is told by a different woman, but all are connected by the tug-of-war between dream and reality in their lives. In each case, the woman's dreams expose the illusion of her daily life, making the dreams more "real" than reality, because, as Vigdís puts it, dreams give a voice to one's inner world, the subconscious, that allows "the other woman" to come out and speak, the one behind the public mask that women have tended to wear in order to survive in a man's world (H.H.S. 64). The ten stories are framed by an address by the author to the reader, which attempts to establish a direct, physical connection between the two. As Jon Thiem (240-41) has demonstrated, such textualization of the reader is a feature common to many magical realist texts: the reader is magically transported into the world of the text, losing her detachment and becoming an agent in the fictional world. However, whereas in male fictions the author and reader tend to become rivals or contestants for the production of the text, and most readers end up as victims, here, the relationship becomes erotic, a physical encounter driven by desire.

Vigdís's second work was another short story collection entitled *Eldur og Regn* [Fire and Rain] (1985), characterised by a similar blending of poetry and prose, but this time the stories rely heavily on folkloric and mythic motifs, creating contemporary folk tales. The collection rather baffled many readers and critics. When asked what she meant by writing these modern folk tales, she replied that she had always been fascinated by the enduring attraction and relevance of these age-old motifs, which, in her view, represent the creativity of the human imagination, the human spirit, and symbolise inner life, or, in Vigdís' own words, the elves and "draugar og djöflar í mér og öðrum" [devils and ghosts within you and me] (Jóhanna Steinsdóttir 25). Vigdís herself grew up in an area in Reykjavík that was being built up at the time and, as she says, "ævintýrið og þjóðsagan voru lifandi þáttur í hversdagsleikanum. Draugar og heilagur andi jafnraunverulegir og þabbi og mamma" [folk- and fairy tales were a living part of the everyday.

Ghosts and the holy spirit as real as mum and dad] (Friðrika Benónýs 74): “raunveruleikinn er ekki aðeins ytra borð heldur líka innra líf ... raunsæi er allt, líka það sem ekki er og það sem getur hvergi gerst nema innra með manneskjunni” [reality is not just what’s on the outside but also inner life ... it’s everything, also that which is not and what cannot happen except in one’s mind] (Elín Bára Magnúsdóttir 13), and “raunveruleikinn er mystískur, hvert augnablik er leyndardómsfullt” [reality is mystical, each moment mysterious] (Árni Óskarsson 12).

Folk tales are of course an integral part of community culture, expressing the ways in which people have survived in a particular place over time, and connecting the community’s present with its past and future. One of the tales in *Eldur og regn* became the basis for Vigdís’s first novel, *Kaldaljós* [Cold Light] (1987), which is the story of a young boy, Grímur, who is an artist with special, or second, sight: he has prophetic visions which he translates into drawings. The novel is set in a time and place that are hard to locate specifically: the little fishing village under the mountain, Fjörður [Fjord], could be anywhere in Iceland at any time. Like Bjartur in Laxness’ famous novel *Sjálfstætt fólk* (1934-35) [*Independent People*] (1945/1997) which, by the way, also has many magical realist elements, Grímur is in a way an Icelandic archetype, as are his family, and Icelandic history is collapsed into this one generation, with family members being magically transformed into other individuals in a different place and time. In this way, the novel emphasises the timelessness underlying its cyclical, repetitional structure. Like Márquez’ Macondo, Fjörður’s cultural specificity spills over into the universal, it’s one place yet all places. It is unusual in Icelandic fiction though, where there is a deep-rooted connectedness to time and place, and their specific location is a traditional method of grounding even the most marvellous of tales. In fact, and rather tellingly I think, this feature of the novel was commented upon much more in Iceland than the fact that the novel is about a boy with second sight whose muse is a witch and who disappears into a painting at the end.

The main event in the novel that determines the course of Grímur’s life is the avalanche that kills his entire family, a tragedy that reflects the inevitable risk of living with nature and is repeated many times over across the generations in Iceland, its memory preserved in shared community history. Grímur, a child of nature, has to come to terms with the fact that the mountain that inspires him and that he regarded as the protector of the village is at the same time the destroyer of his family and his home. The mimetic constraints of a realism that developed in European industrial cities have never been able to express effectively the experiences of living in and with an awe-inspiring and “unconsumed” geography such as Iceland’s (Delbaere-Garant 253), something which, according to Alejo Carpentier, needed the *literary marvellous*, the freedom of the imaginary, for its expression.



Grímur overcomes his ten years of grief and “darkness” with the help of his muse, the witch Álfrún, who has been his guide, the keeper of his art, and who finally introduces him to a vision of “the light.” She suddenly disappears but leaves him enough money to go to art school in the city. In this setting, people and events keep re-occurring, until Grímur finally manages to paint his fjord and his people, and becomes one with the painting. This kind of metamorphosis, the blurring of the boundary between the artist and his art, as well as between life and death (Grímur stays in touch with his family after their death and eventually joins them), and past and present (time is cyclical, people and events are self-replicating), characterises most of Vigdís’s fiction. The eternal return, a holistic vision, mythic truth, is as much a component of collective memory as historical events: in this manner, as Zomara and Faris (6) put it, “historical narrative is no longer chronicle but clairvoyance”, and an alternate history of Iceland is created alongside the officially sanctioned one. And clearly many people were able to relate to it, for the novel was a bestseller and was turned into an equally successful film scripted and directed by Hilmar Oddsson (2004).

The novel *Stúlkan í skóginum* [The Girl in the Grove] from 1992 is, on one level, a fairy tale, but one grounded in specific locations in Reykjavík on one particular day in August 1991. The two main characters are modern versions of the ugly witch and the beautiful princess, except that here, as in most of Vigdís’s fiction, appearances are dangerously deceptive. Guðrún is a severely crippled and deformed middle-aged woman, an outcast of society, which judges her by her looks. She flees from her outer reality to an inner world of the imagination, a green, lush grove, where her alter-ego lives. This is a natural haven of peace for Guðrún and an outlet for her feelings and creativity. Her “outer” life consists of a routine of rescuing books from the city’s rubbish bins; Guðrún takes them home and has made a vow to memorize six lines from each book she finds to enrich her life. Guðrún thus represents the riches and beauty of an inner life, where imagination and creativity reside.

One day, she is unexpectedly invited home by Hildur, a complete stranger, for coffee. This fair young maiden, however, disguises a sorceress of great cruelty and dark purpose. She is a dollmaker whose creations have been found to be life-“like,” but lacking in “life.” Since Hildur does not have an inner life, the true source of creativity and imagination, she has devised a way of taking it from Guðrún. Gradually, she invades Guðrún’s forest and shatters the walls of her inner world by exposing her to her outer reality in the form of the doll she has made in Guðrún’s likeness. Finally, in an erotic encounter, Hildur and Guðrún merge and swap bodies, so that Hildur can experience what it is like to be Guðrún. Yet Hildur fails to recognize the essence of what she desires most from Guðrún when she neglects to memorize the lines from the books she finds and make them her own.

This novel is, again, located in liminal territory, at the conjunction of inner and outer life, art and reality. It is difficult not to see Hildur, on one level, as a representation of mimetic art, imitating life but lacking the real “life,” the wonders of Guðrún’s imagination. Guðrún, meanwhile, acts not only as the preserver of Icelandic literature but also as the keeper of its true spirit, its riches, by memorizing part of its contents rather than focusing on the outer shell, the title, or the author, as Hildur does, something which some critics have read as a critique of the contemporary, commercial approach to literature as consumer object marketed by way of fancy cover designs and turning authors into celebrities. Guðrún reclaims literary works for a popular, oral tradition. Taking this view a little further, one could then even read Guðrún’s deformity as “felt literary history,” the “magical bodily echoes” of the external state of Icelandic literature (Zomara and Faris 9).

Once again, we have as main characters women whose lives are incomplete and who only really live in or through their dreams as a way of satisfying their longings, but in this case Hildur’s obsession and literal execution of her dream becomes truly sinister and raises serious questions about the responsibility of the artist towards her creation. And Vigdís is not content to hide behind her own authorial inviolacy, because she herself appears in the story as the writer who followed Guðrún as a possible subject for a novel, but who eventually decided that Guðrún did not suit her purposes so she recommended her to Hildur instead. At the same time, we, the readers, share Guðrún’s thoughts and, like her, are invited over by the author into her world, where we experience joy, excitement, fear and suffering, and are, for the duration of the reading experience, completely in the author’s power. In this way, the assumed boundaries between the fictional world and the reader’s are, again, magically transgressed. We do not know what happens to Guðrún in the end; her fate closely resembles Grímur’s as she seems to disappear forever into her grove, becoming one with her creation, which would give the novel a circular structure. But the ending is ambiguous: the final lines, italicized as are all the lines Guðrún memorizes, are also the first six lines of the novel, so it could also be that the story was in fact nothing but Guðrún’s dream, where she becomes a character in a book she finds. Or does Hildur indeed kill her to animate her doll?

In *Grandavegur 7* [7 Grandi Road] (1994), we return to the perspective and experiences of a clairvoyant child, this time that of a fourteen-year-old girl, Fríða (Einfríður). Fríða does not just have occasional visions; she actually communicates with the dead: family members and inhabitants of her house. Their talk never gives her a moment’s peace, so that, unlike most of Vigdís’s protagonists, she actually tries to find refuge in the “real” world. The experiences the dead share with her make Fríða’s perspective an intriguing blend of childlike naiveté and age-old wisdom. Like *Stúlkan í skóginum*, the novel is, on one level, specifically located in time and place: one day in May 1990 in one clearly-defined area in

Reykjavík. At the same time, however, time collapses, for Fríða becomes a time-traveller through her memories and visions, as she experiences events from different times and generations and can read other people's thoughts. Fríða's is, then, a polyphonic narrative. Her interactions with the house ghosts emphasize that the past is an inalienable part of the present, and we are never isolated individuals who live only in the here and now, but are part of a larger whole. This underlines Fríða's movement in the book from being an outsider, "different" from others, towards integration into community and wholeness.

At the beginning of the novel, Fríða's dog Fúsíus, her only friend, is killed by a car and his remains eaten by gulls. This loss of a loved one echoes the larger losses in her life and that of her mother: their emotionally unstable father, who used to leave the house during his drinking bouts, has permanently left them after the death of Fríða's brother Haukur, who died in a nightly attempt to conjure their father back home. Fríða's world is thus a lonely and shattered one, as loss has alienated mother and daughter from each other, each trying to find solace in her own world. Fríða embarks on a trip through town to find her father to request his presence at the funeral of her dog that same evening, carrying Fúsíus's bones around in bag, in an echo of Rebeka in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Her journey through town is also a journey into womanhood, as she falls in love and has her first sexual encounter that day, which in turn helps her to feel affinity with her mother and establish a connection with her mother's friend Þóra, another woman who has withdrawn into solitude after suffering a loss. At the end of the day, also the end of the novel, Fríða has thus not only gained a friend, her lover Hörður, but has also entered a community of women, and learned from her own and her ghost friends that loss is a part of love. At the same time, however, Fríða breaks with the tradition of the passive, all-suffering woman who time and again, in the desire for love, allows an all too fallible man to become the centre of her life and depend on him to give it meaning. When she makes love with Hörður, it is she who takes control, and at that moment also abandons her dead brother's obsessive urgings to find their father at all costs. By letting go of this obsession and moving away from this centrifugal patriarchal force, she creates room in her life for a relationship with her mother, and thus she completes her journey of female individuation. On a metafictional level, this movement is echoed in Þóra's exhortation when she reads the notes of the poet towards a novel he intends to write about the people of 7 Grandi Road, that she is so tired of all the Úa's in novels, a reference to the main woman protagonist in Laxness's novel *Kristnihald undir jökli* (1968) [*Under the Glacier*] (1972/2005) and a symbol of the eternal mystical female, thereby firmly denouncing the objectification of women characters in the male-dominated literary tradition.

In the novella *Nætursöngvar* [Nocturnal Songs] (1998), Vigdís returns to the themes of folklore, the illusion that is daily life, and the tug-of-war between dream and reality. The narrator, a wife and mother, receives seven nightly visits from

a man with a raven's head who takes her on seven different journeys. Gradually, the narrator's dream world completely takes over from reality, and her nocturnal experiences become more real than her waking ones. On her journeys she runs the gamut of her own emotions, as she is made to face, indeed live in, an inner world that has not received any expression. When the man with the raven's head takes his leave after his final visit, the narrator is a transformed woman. Her waking reality and her dream world have fused, and her voice now speaks for the inner, dreaming woman as well as the outer, waking one. Her story, an act of creativity, is her tribute to the man and to her transformation. When the novella came out in 1998, Vigdís was of course asked by every single interviewer who or what the man with the raven's head was, and what he signified. Her answer was consistently the same: he is who he is, he simply is. In the world of magical realist fiction, it is belief that counts: the magic is not a consciously created symbol, it is part of a world view, organically growing out of the world that the storyteller creates, and is an essential part of it.

All of Vigdís's protagonists are artists in one sense or another, women (and one boy) who trust, or learn to trust, the world of their imagination and emotion, sometimes taking refuge in it, sometimes rediscovering it, sometimes hiding in it, but it is always there, and in the end, it serves as a source of creativity. The creative act empowers the protagonists, gives them a voice, and allows them to come to terms with reality, to re-possess and redefine it. These inner worlds of the imagination are as real as the outer world, and represent alternate realities that allow the protagonists to interrupt established ways of viewing conventional reality, culture and tradition. Through acts of magic, artistic creation and/or storytelling, they rename and reaffirm the local, the communal, the non-rational, as positive forces in a technocratic, global age of angst, fragmentation and isolation, as a force of survival and affirmation of life.

Ultimately, it is this focus on fusion and connection that, in my view, both draws women writers to magical realism and distinguishes the ways they write it from the way male authors use it. Magical realist strategies allow women to write in a female storytelling tradition that has survived in Iceland across the centuries. They also create a variety of ways to re-tell, and re-affirm, Icelandic life, history and tradition from a shared, community perspective, to repossess historical experience through storytelling and art. Vigdís's protagonists all seek to make their worlds whole again in one way or another, whether they are trying to come to terms with loss, alienation or exclusion.

Often, this means "correcting" the official, accepted ways of perceiving cultural legacy, and writing/righting the wrongs on which our established views of what constitutes "reality" depend, offering alternatives to relate to each other as humans, and making the world whole again, while giving woman back her rightful place in the centre of it, making her the site of the magical and historical, "a history that survives and nurtures the present," and by creating fiction that,

in Gabrielle Foreman's words, "reintegrates the modern, disintegrated self back into the vanishing cultural community" (286).

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